

A
S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT THE
PARISH CHURCH OF TRING,
HERTFORDSHIRE,

ON WEDNESDAY, FEB. 21, 1781.

BEING

The Day appointed to be observed as a Day of Fasting.

BY

THE REV. JOHN DUPRÉ, A. M.

FELLOW OF EXETER COLLEGE, OXFORD.

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M DCC LXXX I.

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ZEPHANIAH ii. 1, 2.

*Gather yourselves together, yea gather yourselves together,
O nation not desired. Before the decree bring forth,
before the day pass as the chaff, before the fierce anger
of the Lord come upon you, before the day of the Lord's
anger come upon you.*

THIS address of the prophet Zephaniah is designed to work upon the fears of his fellow-citizens, by a representation of God's impending judgments. No image of terror can be better conceived, or more fully described. We read, in the first place, a most earnest and persuasive exhortation; "gather yourselves together, yea gather yourselves together, O nation not desired!" The style is emphatical, and the same expression, twice repeated in the compass of one line, awakes the soul to the expectation of some important consequence. Then follows the alarming reason; "before the decree bring forth." — The prophet speaks directly to the point — he does not say, before the decree shall be made — the decree was already formed; the cloud that bore the tempest in it's womb was ready to
A burst,

burst, and overwhelm the guilty land. The second metaphor still enforces the former ; “ before the day “ pass as the chaff,” that is, before the day of vengeance swallow up the nation with the same inconceivable rapidity, as chaff, the lightest thing in nature, is swept away by the violence of a storm. The eloquent writer, having thus far conducted the sentence by a beautiful gradation of figures, speaks at last in plain terms the dreadful truth, which he aimed to inculcate ; “ before the fierce anger of the Lord come “ upon you, before the day of the Lord’s anger come “ upon you.”

THUS it appears that Zephaniah, by divine inspiration, was favoured with a foreknowledge of the coming evil : and he entreats his countrymen with the love and earnestness of a real patriot, to avert the punishment threatened to their complicated transgressions, by gathering themselves together for the purposes of a general and devout humiliation.

WE, my brethren, are assembled on a similar occasion. We are assembled to confess the multitude and variety of our offences, and to deprecate, by a solemn and unaffected repentance, the calamities and the sorrows which they have drawn down on this distracted country from the justice of that uncontrollable being, whose judgments, at this time, are most assuredly abroad in the earth.

SUCH is the explanation of our text, and such, I apprehend,

apprehend, are the motives which have drawn the present congregation, at this critical, and awful period. To improve it into the best of consequences, to address your hearts, in all probability softened or terrified by the recent judgments of the Almighty, by the calamities of war, and the late prodigious devastation of the elements in the western region of the globe, is now the province of the preacher. Grant, O God, that he may speak with energy, with conviction on this great subject! Grant it for the welfare of thy dying creatures now bending low at the footstool of thy throne!

MY brethren, you remember the declaration of our Redeemer; "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." Employ your attention a moment on the advantages civil, religious, and commercial, which this nation possesses, or did possess, beyond the example of former times. Look back into historic annals, and trace the astonishing dispensations of Providence which have exalted this country to opulence, to empire, to glory. Our ancestors, when this Island was first discovered by the Roman chief, were found in a state of barbarity, unacquainted with those sciences which polish and ennoble the mind, ignorant of those useful arts which supply the necessities of men, and strangers to that liberal intercourse which advances the happiness of life. No well-regulated government was then established; nor was life and property then secured by the sanction of venerable laws. The command of priests, barbarous

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as that savage people, was the first object of their reverence, and the sword was their law. Their system of religion, if it deserves that honourable name, was superstitious in the extreme. A blind veneration for their Druids prevailed; a multiplicity of Gods was adored; and human victims, enemies whom the lot of war had made their captives, or children torn from the maternal breast, were sacrificed on their bloody altars. Such are the horrors of ignorance and superstition. Rude indeed as our progenitors were, the love of their country was ardent in their generous heart, and the principle of liberty, which has since glowed with so noble an enthusiasm among their descendants, was kindled in their daring bosoms. Their barren mountains, their uncultivated vallies, and their little huts were dear, because they were *Free*. The gallant Roman found them, undisciplined indeed, but valiant in the fight, and obstinate in retreat. This love of freedom however, this glorious defence of their country, was no compensation, no counterbalance for their uncivilization, their internal anarchy, their superstition, and their want of government. There we must look for the particular and collective happiness of a nation. And in these most essential objects the mercies of God have been singularly apparent.

COMPARE the miseries which must be experienced in the savage state, and the undescribable happiness which is diffused through every part of a well administered kingdom. I will go farther; compare the oppressions

oppressions and terrors which reign among the subjects of a despotic government, with the security and boldness which animate the possessors of liberty; then judge if any nation or people, since the beginning of time, were ever so distinguished by Providence as the inhabitants of Britain? The revolution of some ages has improved us, from the state of barbarity, just now mentioned, to the utmost degree of civilization, and knowledge; and, after violent and painful struggles, has settled the British government in its present excellent form, poised in the nicest equilibrium, and in short perfect as far as any thing human is capable of perfection. The arts of princes, however powerful, the intrigues of ministers, however politic, have not hitherto been able to extend the royal prerogative on the destruction of our civil liberties. A government, where the commons form an equally respectable branch of the legislature with the nobles, and the king, must rest on the sure basis of freedom. Hence the people acquire a significance, nay a majesty in the state, which secures them protection and reverence. To this impartial arrangement we are indebted for the establishment and execution of the wisest laws. The poor are no longer exposed to the wanton insolence of the rich. The noble, however splendid his birth, or large his possessions, is not allowed to violate with impunity the rights of the lowest individual. The laws, undazzled by the glare of pomp, will vindicate the injured cause, and punish the proud oppressor. Hence every man may eat the fruit of his own vine in peace. Hence the laborious peasant may cultivate

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his fields in security, and, when the daily toil is over, may sit in the circle of a chearful family made happy by his return, without the least apprehension that the rapacious hand of power will snatch away the well-earned profits of his industry. The British laws, as they are dictated by a spirit of wisdom and justice, are also tempered with mercy. Hence, while in other countries, even some of the most refined in Europe, where despotism tramples on the privileges of the subject, such as France, Spain, and Russia, life is forced out of the wretched criminal by lingering and exquisite torments; here, when the welfare of society demands the extinction of the guilty, the stroke of death is administered in the gentlest manner. Imprisonments at the mandate of a tyrannic king, secret assassinations by the dagger or by poison, midnight execution, familiar in absolute governments, have no existence in this land of liberty. Such are some of our civil advantages; such are the delicious fruits of that sound policy, which is far superior to the boasted republics of Greece and Rome, the pride of Englishmen, the envy of foreigners, and the admiration of mankind.

THUS are we blessed, through Providence, above all the nations of the earth, by our excellent political constitution, which renders our properties, our lives, and liberties inviolable. But there is another blessing, in whose absence the purest civil government would be extremely imperfect. The blessing, I mean, of worshipping God in spirit and in truth, the blessing of the
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the protestant religion. Who but looks back with an eye of pity and indignation on that miserable æra, when conscience was fettered by the spiritual tyranny of the Roman pontiff: who, according to the verified prophecy of Daniel, did “not regard any God, but “magnified himself above all.” The holy book, containing “the word of eternal life,” was withheld by the crafty priesthood from the laity, the service of God was performed in an unknown language, and every obstruction was artfully thrown to bar the avenues of truth. The reasons which dictated this conduct were obvious and substantial. The knowledge of the scriptures circulated through Europe would soon have sapèd the foundations of papal power; would soon have discovered to the astonished reader, how opposite to the purity of the christian religion was all its gaudy pomp of ceremonies; how useless was that service in which a burdensome repetition of tedious forms was the only merit; would soon have pointed out the impiety of paying homage to the relics and images of saints; the vanity of interceding for the souls of the departed in a fabled purgatory; the futility of auricular confession; the absurdity of transubstantiation, and the falshood of those unnumbered legendary traditions, which gave to religion the semblance of a romantic tale, but which unhappily were but too well calculated to support the pillars of the Romish throne, and to maintain that incredible influence over the opinions of men, which, it is known, the Popes exerted in the night of general ignorance. Ah! then, my brethren, the faggot and the

the wheel were employed to the most unjust and cruel of purposes, to bend the stubborn conscience, and to extort a confession of faith directly opposite to the evidence of reason. In that age of religious slavery, to doubt was the dungeon, to dissent was death. The compass of a discourse will not allow me to lay before you an historical account of those surprizing events, which rescued us from spiritual oppression. The directing hand of providence was clearly marked in every step of this grand revolution. It is enough for us to taste its happy consequences. The protestant religion, as it flourishes in this country, is the fairest copy of primitive christianity. The liturgy of the church of England is a comprehensive form of worship, conceived in the simplest language, praying for all the wants of mortal creatures, full of elevated conceptions of the deity, and breathing an humble and devotional spirit. The church of England, imitative of that benevolence and charity which her God and Saviour has left her as an example, is now become a friend to universal toleration. No violence is offered to the tenderness of conscience; the bigot rage of persecution is for ever banished. Every man may worship the most high in a manner the most conformable to his own private ideas. The sacred volume, translated in the vernacular tongue, affords to the meanest person an opportunity of investigating truth, and of knowing "what is that good and perfect will of God." Here no insidious priesthood pretend to tyrannize over the opinions of men; but the ministers of the Lord, in general, are distinguished by a liberal and

and well-informed understanding; and with what zeal, yea with what unction of language, yea with what unaffected seriousness are their public discourses delivered to their audience.

THESE are thy blessings, O thou most pure and divine christianity, reformed from the corruption of ages, and the abuse of men! and these blessings the British nation has enjoyed in the most eminent degree.

FROM the civil and religious, pass we to the commercial advantages of this country. From a state of mediocrity we have made a rapid advance to opulence and glory. The variety and extent of our conquests are not even rivalled by the antient Romans. Under Providence, the steady courage, and enterprizing spirit of our valiant countrymen have often checked the ambition of our enemies, and driven them by the terror of their formidable arm from every quarter of the globe. Our well-appointed navies covered the face of the ocean, and awed the subjected world. The treasures of the east and west were brought by each swelling tide into our crouded harbours. Hence the opulence of the nation, the enormous riches of individuals, and that general circulation, which was felt in some degree by every rank in the community. Hence too the vast magnitude of the metropolis, the magnificence of our towns, the number and splendour of our palaces; and hence the encouragement of those arts, which support the poor mechanic, and add grace and dignity to human life.

THE natural advantages of this country claim also to be recorded with gratitude, whether we consider the singular conveniency of its situation with respect to universal commerce, or its fruitfulness and rural beauty, or the strength, genius, and number of its inhabitants, or the temperature of its air, never impregnated with those noxious particles which, in less fortunate climates, sweep thousands in a moment to the grave. Yet I will not dwell on these advantages which, however considerable, are not of the least value without the enjoyment of civil and religious freedom. Yes, the frozen mountains of the utmost north, covered with eternal snows, would have more attractions for the generous mind, than the most delicious region, where slavery crouches to the tyrant power.

Now if there be a God who rules above, if there be a Providence concerned in the direction of human affairs; and that there is, the voice of reason and of the gospel explicitly affirm, then is the inference easy; "we got not the land in possession by our own sword, neither did our own arm save us; but thy right hand, and thine arm, and the light of thy countenance, because thou hadst a favour unto us." We did not rise to this summit of glory, we did not subdue and acquire such immense territories by the number and fortitude of our armies, our plan of internal government was not the mere suggestion of human wisdom, but thy almighty arm led to conquest, and thy counsels informed. "Thou hast not dealt

“ dealt so with any nation ; and for thy judgments
 “ they have not known them.”

Now, my brethren, a warm presumption arises, that a nation, so enlightened by divine knowledge, so distinguished by the full enjoyment of that freedom which is denied to the largest portion of mankind, would make a suitable return to the father of mercies by its love to religion, and its marked superiority of private and public virtues. I do not love to delineate the dark side of things ; I do not love to bode evil to my country ; but it is an obvious truth that we are fallen into that relaxation of morals, the sure concomitant alas ! of too long a succession of prosperity, which was the bane of ancient states. The unbounded flow of wealth, which has lately been poured into this country from the east, has corrupted the purity of our manners ; and we have plunged in the stream of asiatic luxury. The spring once contaminated, the waters will be poisoned to the remotest channel. It is no wonder, when they, who from their high station have a commanding influence, lead the sad example, that such a notorious want of sobriety, temperance, industry, and virtue should disgrace the lower orders, the tradesmen, labourers, and mechanics. By a strange inversion of what is good and sacred, we abuse our liberty, and degrade our religion. Liberty is made a cloak of licentiousness, patriotism self interest, and religion a form. Instead of virtue behold libertinism, prophaness, and debauchery. Principles, the most repugnant to the happiness of society, are avowed and published.

published to the world. Christianity is boldly attacked by the deist, its system of morals is exposed as absurd, and its principal doctrines as improbable and unsupported. These authors not contented with unsettling the religious opinions of their country, strive to rob her of her hopes of immortality. The temper and passions of the age are but too favourable to this species of composition. And while those chaste and sober writings, which plead the cause of virtue and religion, are perused with indifference, those pernicious books, which sport with the same and character of others, are considered as the quintessence of wit and of genius; and those, which inflame and pollute the imagination, are eagerly sought, and read with avidity. The late rapid circulation of a certain work, the production (I blush to name it) of an unworthy minister of the gospel, which is intended to subvert that conjugal union, on which experience has demonstrated public and private happiness to be founded, will be a perpetual witness to the licentious spirit of the present period. Another has made an impious attempt to divest the blessed Saviour of his divinity, and his mediatorial power; and, on the same level with Solon, Confucius, Mohammed, and the lawgivers of old, has dared to place him, who is the same yesterday, to day, and for ever. The liberty of the press is a dear privilege to Englishmen—to retrench it in any degree is a delicate and alarming measure—but at the same time it were much to be wished that a seasonable check might be opposed to this torrent of licentiousness. For these principles and doctrines are soon
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brought forward into active life, and are the origin of that universal irreligion which is now so rife and prevalent. " Shall not I visit them for these things, " saith the Lord ; shall not my soul be avenged on " such a nation as this ? "

THE history of antient nations lays before the eye of posterity some dreadful examples of the just judgments of Almighty God. Recall to your memories the splendour, riches, and population of those mighty empires which, in their turn, made so distinguished a figure on the theatre of the world. Have you forgot the vast domains of the capital of Assyria ? Have you forgot the glory of the haughty Nebuchadnezzar, the voluptuous court of the soft Belshazzar ? Have you forgot that, when in the height of jollity and merriment, the spirits flushed with wine and beauty, " he " lifted up himself against the Lord of heaven, " the fingers of man's hand wrote on the wall these emphatic words, " Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharfin ; God " has numbered thy kingdom, and finished it ; thou " art weighed in the balance and found wanting ; " thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes " and Persians." And before that very night had run half her course, the city, surprized by the invading enemy, was deluged with blood and death ; and so completely levelled and demolished, that, in the progress of years, the smallest traces of its existence were not to be found ; the place where it stood was unknown ; and the passenger might say " an heap of " dust alone remains of thee." Turn your eyes to
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the republics and states of Greece, the nurse of arts and sciences, the chosen seat of philosophy. Where alas! have that people vanished? degenerated from the virtues of their ancestors, they are swallowed up by the Turkish power, and nought remains of all their learning and glory—but an empty name. Turn next and weep over the lamentable siege of Jerusalem; a siege where the rage of famine was so irresistible, that all the ties of humanity and relationship were cut asunder; and the prophecy of Moses was dreadfully accomplished; “the tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, shall secretly eat the children which she bore.” Think on that incredible desolation which ensued, when above a million of the Jews were slaughtered without mercy by the victorious and exasperated Romans; and the miserable remnant were dispersed in every quarter of the world, as we see them at this day, a despised and rejected people. But the conquerors in their turn, absorbed in the most monstrous vices, enervated by luxury, and grown presumptuous by success, became at length fit objects of the divine vengeance. A swarm of Barbarians, issuing from the frozen north in search of happier climates, over ran all Italy. Spoil, ruin, and havoc marked their fatal progress. Where is now majestic Rome? what is become of that proud capital, the dread of nations, and the mart of the world? where are its magnificent streets; its stupendous temples and palaces; its monuments of exquisite architecture?

teature? where is all that pomp and refinement? where are its senators, those sages, and lawgivers? where are its demigods and heroes? and where those private citizens, whose wealth emulated that of potent kings? fallen is the mistress of the world, and scarce a mournful wreck is left behind.

ARE such revolutions the effect of blind casualty, and not produced by the decrees of an over-ruling deity? will the boldest enemy of Providence dare to assert it? apply to human wisdom; and ask if human wisdom, with all its boasted sagacity, when Rome was in the meridian of its glory, could have foreseen so mournful a revolution. It is worthy of observation, that God never punishes a nation till it is irreclaimably lost to virtue and religion. This appears to have been the unchangeable scheme of Providence; and it is consistent with infinite justice. Men are not always corrected in the present life, because a state of future retribution is appointed for individuals. But empires, as they have no existence beyond time, must be chastised, if at all, in this sublunar world.

THE British nation ought to imbibe a lesson of wisdom from such awful examples; ought to derive instruction from these recorded events. Great, as I have said before, great are our privileges, great are our opportunities for knowledge and experience. But as we have trod in the footsteps of other empires less enlightened, the dangers which threaten this seemingly devoted country are more boundless and terrible.

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Far be it from me to intimidate your minds by tinging them with superstitious fears. My aim is to mould them into proper sentiments of our situation, not to oppress them with vain alarms.

THE serious observer would incline to suppose that the great God was meditating some important transaction to take place at this crisis, as a warning to the sons of men. The flames of war are kindling in most parts of the earth. The ambitious potentates of Europe are rushing to the dire contention. The American world is a scene of desolation; and the east, where the humanizing virtues are sacrificed to avarice, is stained with blood. Repeated shocks of earthquakes have been felt in various places. And oh! what language shall I find to describe the horrors of those tremendous hurricanes, which, like a second deluge, have ravaged our west-India settlements. How shall I paint the relentless fury of the elements, which combined, as it were, to sweep away the living from the face of the earth! how shall I depict the tempestuous sea, rushing in mountainous waves over the towns, the land and its produce, and defacing in a moment all the beauteous works of industry, the hopes of the laborious farmer, and the sanguine prospects of the merchant! Hence nakedness, hunger, and beggary: hence the destruction of respectable families, and the loss of several thousand lives. O empire of Britain, “two things are come upon thee, “who shall be sorry for thee? destruction and desolation,

“ lation, the famine and the sword ; by whom shall
 “ I comfort thee ?”

WAR of itself, my brethren, unconnected with other calamities, is a sufficient evil. “ Then it is
 “ that the land mourns, and the pleasant places of
 “ the wilderness are dried up.” Then it is that
 “ Rachel weeps for her children, and will not be
 “ comforted, because they are not.” How many a
 firm patriot, whose talents might have shone in the
 cause of liberty ; how many a hero, whose valour
 might have preserved his country ; how many a ten-
 der husband, torn from the embrace of a beloved
 wife ; how many a father, separated from the dear
 objects of his affections ; how many a youth, deplored
 by his mourning parents, with virtues ripened on his
 blooming head, have been mowed down by the iron
 hand of unsparing war ! “ Oh, thou sword of the
 “ Lord, how long will it be e’er thou be quiet ?
 “ put thyself up into thy scabbard, rest and be
 “ still !”

THE crying sins of individuals are the grand ori-
 ginal of these calamities. Lay it to heart, my breth-
 ren, lay it to heart ; and let it produce that sincere
 and general reformation, which yet may save this
 country, and stop the destroying angel whose sword
 is now extended over the land. “ Rend your hearts,
 “ and not your garments.” When Jonah cried “ yet
 “ forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed ;” the

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people

people of Nineveh "believed in God, proclaimed a
 "fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest even
 "to the least; for, said they, who can tell if God
 "will repent, and turn away from his fierce anger,
 "that we perish not." Let us then, my dear brethren,
 and fellow-citizens, if we reverence the majesty
 of heaven and earth; if we are attached to the gos-
 pel of Jesus Christ; if we have a spark of public
 virtue; if we love our country, our relatives, and
 ourselves; let us give a bright example to the rest of
 the world, by a serious repentance, and a consequent
 reformation of manners. May religion, and the mo-
 ral virtues, may charity, benevolence, sincerity, jus-
 tice, temperance, and honesty flourish among us to
 the latest generations. May intestine dissensions, and
 party rage sink to their native hell; and may har-
 monious concord bless the empire through all its
 connexions. And thou, O peace serene, too long
 alas! estranged and banished from this weeping
 realm, return, at last return, and bring in thy smil-
 ing train sweet plenty, domestic happiness, and public
 joy. And, by the favour and the grace of God, may
 we behold a realization of those blessings which the
 Psalmist has enumerated as attendant on a religious
 people; "that our sons may grow up as the young
 "plants, and that our daughters may be as the
 "polished corners of the temple; that our garners
 "may be full and plenteous with all manner of
 "store; that our sheep may bring forth thousands;
 "and ten thousands in our streets; that our oxen
 may

“ may be strong to labour; that there be no decay, no leading into captivity, and no complaining in our streets.” “ Happy are the people that are in such a case; yea blessed are the people who have the Lord for their God.”

F I N I S.

"I am not sure if I have ever before
"seen a man so young and so
"strong in his mind." "I have
"seen many men who are
"strong in their bodies, but
"not in their minds."

P. I. M. 1